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WASHINGTON D.C. – Vietnam continues to backslide on human rights and religious freedom with the detention Wednesday of Le Thi Cong Nhan for giving interviews to international media, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today.

Le Thi Cong Nhan, a prominent human rights and religious freedom dissident, was released from prison Saturday, two months shy of completing a three-year sentence for “anti-government activity.” But she was detained again at a Hanoi police station Wednesday for telling reporters that her time in prison confirmed her “faith” in the peaceful “struggle for human rights and democracy in Vietnam.”

“USCIRF condemns the outrageous police harassment and detention of Le Thi Cong Nhan in the strongest possible terms. She represents the best of Vietnam’s future and not a threat to its government. The international community should act to make sure she does not exchange one prison for another,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. “USCIRF also calls for the unconditional release of Le Thi Cong Nhan and other peaceful human rights and religious freedom advocates, including Father Nguyen Van Ly and Nguyen Van Dai. We urge the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam to echo this call and to meet with Le Thi Cong Nhan.”

Le Thi Cong Nhan was imprisoned in 2007 at the same time as fellow dissidents Nguyen Van Dai and Fr. Nguyen Van Ly. During USCIRF visits to Vietnam in 2007 and 2009, the Vietnamese government granted USCIRF delegations unusual access to all three prisoners. All expressed a firm commitment to the peaceful advancement of religious freedom and the rule of law in Vietnam, saying that such action was essential to the future of Vietnam and better U.S.-Vietnam relations.

USCIRF has lobbied the Vietnamese government for the release of these prisoners and others detained or harassed for religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, including seeking the humanitarian release of Father Ly who suffered a debilitating stroke in October 2009. He remains in solitary confinement.

“USCIRF has given the Obama Administration and the U.S. Congress compelling evidence of severe and ongoing religious freedom violations in Vietnam, warranting its re-designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC),” said Mr. Leo.

The CPC designation would mark Vietnam as one of the world’s most egregious violators of

religious freedom.

During a House Foreign Relations Committee hearing last week, Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell acknowledged that Vietnam was “backsliding” on human rights and religious freedom issues. Mr. Campbell is touring Southeast Asia at this moment, but Vietnam is not his itinerary.

“The human rights record of the government of Vietnam remained problematic,” said the State Department’s 2009 Human Rights Report, which was released yesterday. “The government increased its suppression of dissent, arresting and convicting several political activists. ... The government utilized or tolerated the use of force to resolve disputes with a Buddhist order in Lam Dong and Catholic groups with unresolved property claims. Workers were not free to organize independent unions, and independent labor activists faced arrest and harassment.”

USCIRF has also urged passage of the Vietnam Human Rights Act in Congress believing that this measure will bring tangible improvements for the Vietnamese people and reaffirm America’s commitment to the promotion of human rights and democratic values abroad.

“Public statements of concern are no longer enough; we believe the Obama Administration should take concerted action to encourage specific improvements,” said Mr. Leo. “When used in the past, the CPC designation did not hinder progress on other bilateral interests, but led to tangible improvements on a number of critical human rights concerns. U.S. policy and diplomacy must be clear champions for both universal rights and increased trade, and should send a clear signal that these interests cannot proceed separately.”

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.